



The Agony of Tough Choice

by Francis Tusa

Francis Tusa is the Editor of Defence Analysis. He sees the uncertainty over technology transfer in the Joint Strike Fighter programme as posing several fundamental questions on the timing and direction of UK's future aircraft carrier programme, and calls for strong leadership in 2006.

Who would want to be the MoD line manager for the UK's future carrier programme (CV(F)) at the moment? Or the customer's responsible officer for that matter? There is plenty that one can criticise about how the programme has gone over the past couple of years, more of which anon, but the events of the past few months have thrown up a wonderful [sic] conundrum which stands a good chance of forcing the UK MoD to change how it proceeds with the carrier programme.

Put simply: how on earth can anyone really proceed with building CV(F) while the rather important issue of what aircraft will be operated from the decks is so up in the air? Forget those who insist that, regardless, it is inevitable that the UK will proceed with the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF): that degree of blind support for the programme will founder in the face of rather serious, costed support arguments from the Defence Logistics Organisation, the growing force in UK procurement decisions. If 'operational sovereignty' is not guaranteed, the UK taxpayer will potentially be signing off a blank cheque as regards the operating and support costs of JSF, and these costs will make the up-front purchase costs look small by comparison.

But in the meantime, the UK is back in the situation that it was in at the end of the 1990s: having to look at all options. Will the JSF technology transfer issue be resolved, which many hope for, and which is probably the cheapest option for the UK? Or will the carriers have to go for a full Carrier Variant (CV)

aircraft, be it the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet, or Dassault's beautiful, but flawed, Rafale? Or will the dreaded STOBAR (Short Take Off But Arrested Recovery) option for Typhoon come back into play? Or even a full CV Typhoon? Choices, choices ...

As an aside, it shouldn't be that difficult to come up with a rapid solution to the aircraft dilemma. What has happened to the trade-off studies undertaken to look at all of the options, studies that led to JSF being seen as the best option? Can't someone simply take these off the shelf and see what the pros

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and cons were? Unless – without wishing to seem too cynical – the studies that were undertaken to 'prove' that JSF was the best option were fixed from the outset. This situation would mirror what occurred with the studies for the UK Attack Helicopter programme: these were slanted, as regards the terms of reference, massively in favour of Apache, because the Army Air Corps wanted to buy Apache and nothing else.

But to return to the main point: can anyone really, safely, wisely proceed with building the actual ships when such a fundamental question has yet to be answered? Yes, it's true that the CV(F) design is 'flexible', so that attention has been paid to keeping options open for a STOVL design to be altered to use catapults and arrestor gear. But isn't it blindingly obvious that it is always going to be more expensive and risky to have to retrofit equipment to a carrier, even if the space has been kept free for the extra

gear? Well, it is the lesson of practically every other programme where things 'got left until later', so it seems rather likely that the same will be true for CV(F). As soon as you have to start cutting holes in things, the cost goes up. And cost is an issue that still seems to be unresolved on CV(F).

Now there will be those who will point out that, with the staggered approach to Main Gate that is occurring with CV(F), there is time to take all of this into account. But isn't the real issue that one can study all one likes about the options, but the problem is the realisation, the actual physical delivery of a system? Endless examination of options will not resolve the fundamental problem: what aircraft is going to be using the decks of the two CV(F)s after Harrier leaves service? Only with firm knowledge of this can any rational planning be made.

In which case, there would seem to be two options. The first is for someone to stand up and announce that the UK will not be proceeding with JSF, but will be going for a more conventional aircraft type. Such a decision would allow orders to be placed for catapults and arrestor gear – there are some quite long lead times for specialised equipment such as this. And a decisive direction would also allow the RAF/Fleet Air Arm to increase the number of pilots that they send off to fly carrier fast jets, so the corporate knowledge of CV operations can be built up.

At the same time, serious work could be done on which aircraft the UK is going to buy or develop. Let us hope that the clear lead provided by Minister (Defence Procurement) Lord Drayson about 'Plan B' is being backed up within the MoD, Defence Procurement Agency (DPA) and associated procurement and requirements offices, with staff officers looking seriously at the options.

The other option is for someone to stand up – yes, another case of someone having the courage to put their head above the parapet – and announce that

until there is clarity about the aircraft for CV(F), the programme in all honesty cannot proceed. This is due to the uncertainty, and the resulting risk and potential cost. Would this be unpopular? Probably. And there will be some who will claim that as soon as someone calls for a stop, then the whole project would

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come into question. I'm not so sure.

It comes down to something which all too often is lacking in the MoD's procurement system: leadership. In field operations, one would be looking for someone to shout, 'Follow me!' to the assembled troops around them. But to be fair, procurement as an activity has taken such a series of hammer blows over the past decade, as a result of botched programmes and faulty procurements, that the decisiveness needed to press on with a programme such as CV(F) has probably been knocked out of the system. At the moment, the default option is always to defer decisions, to extend assessment phases, to conduct more studies. And this even if there are some pretty obvious solutions to requirements – the brouhaha over the

Future Rapid Effect System springs to mind in this regard – CYA Syndrome means that the default option is to re-study, regardless.

The tortuous process that CV(F) has been through to date is a perfect example of quite how Byzantine the procurement process in general has become. Assessment, extra assessment, extended assessment, study after study; it all takes time, and it all costs money

Unsmart Procurement?

And to return to the issue of costs, why is it that one still hears talk that the trade-off of capability of CV(F) versus cost has yet to be resolved. This has been knocking around for at least three, and possibly even four, years now, with little sign that a conclusion has been reached.

The line of BAE Systems, now the undisputed leader of the programme after an abortive and wasteful attempt to introduce artificial competitive pressure into the programme, is still that until there is clarity about exactly what CV(F) is going to look like, and what it is going to be able to do, a full and final costing is not possible. But even as late as March, at the company's 2005 results meeting, the suggestion was made – one backed up by other partners of the Carrier Alliance – that if the Royal Navy wants the all-shining, whistles-and-bells ships that it seems to have set its heart on, then the cost of the ships will be north of £4Bn. With a budget of around £3Bn, there is obviously a mismatch here.

And before anyone thinks that the £4Bn figure is one that has been

artificially created by a greedy industry, it is still less than the planned cost of the second French aircraft carrier, according to documents from the National Assembly, and the specifications for that ship do include all the shiny electronics, as well as a point defence missile system.

It still seems amazing that the Royal Navy is playing a hand of cards over

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which it stands likely to lose its shirt. The sensible, wise move is to get the platforms into service, and then sting the MoD and Treasury for the upgrades. 'Well Minister, we would like to deploy the ship to the new trouble area, but without these extra bits of equipment, the risks to service personnel's lives will be great ...' This is a line that tends to get people sitting up and taking notice.

Progress in 2006?

Will we see a resolution to the various questions hovering over and around CV(F) in 2006? Well, one has to hope so. But even with greater clarity on the aircraft type, dynamic leadership on a number of levels, from Ministers downwards, is still going to be needed. ■



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